GIVE IT ALL

September 9, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Romans 12:1-13
Matthew 16:21-28

"I appeal to you...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" Romans 12:1

It is no pulpit hyperbole to tell you how good it is to be back. The only thing better than leaving the city for a while is coming home to it. It is also instructive. When we left here in mid-summer, there was a substantial seven-story building across Chestnut street. In a matter of weeks it is gone, "history" as they say. There's a lesson in that about urban change, the impermanence of human institutions, etc., etc. There is, as well, if you happen to live across the street from it, a lesson in what it's like to reside in the midst of a kind of non-stop, low-grade earthquake. Things have been quivering and shaking and rattling every time the huge ball hits the ground, which was about every seven and one-half seconds while I was trying to write this sermon.

It is, in spite of that, good to be home. Some quiet time allowed me to do the extended and strenuous reading I need to do. In addition to the traditional family migration to the beach, I taught a one-week doctor of ministry course at McCormick Seminary, preached at the Installation Service of a friend of mine at the First Presbyterian Church of Greensboro, a large church that does not have to contend with an ongoing earthquake, and, of course, the choir trip to Great Britain, difficult and demanding duty, but someone on this staff had to do it!

I really must say a word about it. Twenty members of the Morning Choir sang in four British churches: the Cathedral of St. Giles, Edinburgh's High Kirk, the Cathedral Church at York, Yorkminster, one of the largest and most dramatic Gothic Cathedrals in the world; the Chapel of Jesus College at Cambridge, and Evensong at Bath Abbey. Thirty others of us accompanied the choir and were privileged to be the audiences and congregations in those wonderful places, to hear the music we hear every Sunday, sung with such discipline and grace. We were proud, obviously. We gloried in the raised eyebrows of unsuspecting tourists at St. Giles, strolling through the Cathedral and encountering this extraordinary music. We loved the association when the evening tourists at Yorkminster sought us out to tell us how moved they were. And at Bath, in Evensong, we were

all filled with a sense of history and mystery and the palpable fact that here we were, Presbyterians from Chicago, adding our music, our voices, our worship to the conversation between God and the church, which has been going on in that place for 1,000 years. It was a worshipping congregation, our thirty and another one hundred or so. The three Fourth Church ushers in the group were pressed into service and were posted in the center aisle of Bath Abbey greeting and seating people. Dr. Simmons directing, Mary playing the organ, our choir singing. It was a moment I will never forget.

On the days we were on the road we had morning prayers on the bus. And we prayed daily - for the church universal and our church at home. On Sunday morning, August 19, we were in Cambridge, worshipping at the parish church of Greater St. Mary's, the Anglican church across the street from King's College. We heard a woman preach - a deaconess: women are not yet priests in the Anglican Communion, and we participated in the Eucharist, we contributed the money our ushers had collected one morning on the bus, and when, in bidding prayer we were asked to pray for the church in foreign lands, we all - I am sure - were praying for that beloved community of faith in downtown Chicago, where it was 3:30 a.m., but which in a few hours would be taking up its part of the never-ending universal praise of God by the church.

So, thank you to my colleagues on the clergy staff who more than adequately filled this pulpit in my absence, and to musicians and singers, who kept the conversation going, and to all of you who were here, keeping the faith and this church relevantly alive in this our own great space in the heart of this remarkable city. It is very good to be back.

MATTHEW 16:21-28

"Why did they spread this scandalous document before our eyes?" author Annie Dillard asks. It's in a wonderful new book, Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament. Some of the most distinguished modern authors were invited to contribute an essay on one of the books of the New Testament. Dillard is writing about Luke, actually. "When I was a child," she recalls, "the adult members of Pittsburgh society adverted to the Bible unreasonably often. What arcana! Why did they spread this scandalous document before our eyes? If they had read it, I thought, they would have hid it. They did not recognize the lively danger that we would, through repeated exposure, catch a dose of its virulent opposition to their world. Instead they bade us study great chunks of it, and think about those chunks, and, commit them to memory, and ignore them." [p. 35]

Sometimes, I think, these words we have heard so frequently that they are worn down, all the sharp edges and corners smoothed by constant use, these words, I think, should stick in our mouths. And it helps when someone like Dillard, exposed to the church and its Bible reading and Bible quoting, as a child, not much of a church person now, testifies to the power and lifelong inescapable influence of these explosive words.

"This Bible, this ubiquitous, persistent black chunk of a best seller" she writes, "is a singularity, a black hole into which our rich and multiple world strays and vanishes. We crack open its pages at our peril." [p. 26]

For instance, on page 17 of that persistent black chunk of a best seller... "If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me... For whoever would save life will lose it, and whoever loses life will find it," or on page 149, "I appeal to you...to present your bodies to God...as a living sacrifice."

Take up a cross? Lose your life in order to find it? Present your body as a living sacrifice? During the pre-season games, there are young football players, frantically trying to win a permanent job, who are what are called special teams, play with such utter abandonment that insiders sometimes say, "they are offering their bodies"... but me? You? Really?

Nowhere is the Christian faith seen more clearly than in these radically demanding passages. In both Matthew and Paul's letter to the Romans, strenuous demand follows immediately on the heels of some very eloquent theology.

Peter has just confessed his belief that Jesus is the Christ. "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asked. "Who do you say that I am?" It is Peter who confesses. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And then Jesus goes on. There is suffering ahead. Death by crucifixion. Peter doesn't want to hear about that: wants faith without suffering, religion without sacrifice, wants cheap grace, Dietrick Bonhoeffer said. And that is so utterly wrong, Jesus turns on him - "Get behind me Satan." Peter the Rock has become Peter the stumbling block. Why this harshness? Why does Jesus so directly attack his strongest disciple? Is it not because Peter says it for all of us? We want supply side religion - all profit and no taxes. All love and no demand, all theology, no ethics, all comfort and no responsibility.

A few years later, his most eloquent apostle, Paul, was trying to get the whole thing down on paper for some new converts in the capital city. And in the process writes eleven chapters of scholarly, systematic theology about grace and justification and sin and law and then turns it around. "Therefore, present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Let love be genuine, hate what is evil...contribute to the needs of the saints." The first people to read these words confronted a religious situation very different from ours, claiming Christianity as your religious preference is not a difficult thing for most of us. Going to church this morning, September 9, 1990, means sacrificing a cheese omelet, coffee and the Sunday paper. (In the interests of research I took a bike ride along the lake one Sunday morning this summer, saw some church members, had an omelet at Brett's at Waveland, saw some more.) If you worship at eleven, you'll miss part of the first quarter of the Bear's game. But, by and large, most - not all - but most of your peers will think well of you for being here this morning. But in the latter part of the first century, when Matthew, Mark and Luke wrote down their recollections of Jesus and what he said, going to church could get you in a lot of trouble, dead even. "Take up your cross and follow" - some scholars say - comes not only from the words of Jesus but

from the ghastly practice under the Emperor Nero of forcing practicing Christians to parade through the streets of Rome carrying the cross beam of the instrument upon which they would be nailed publicly for the Emperor's and the crowd's amusement. They are, as I think about that, unspeakably poignant words.

They are not appropriately employed to describe life's little annoyances - which we sometimes call our cross to bear. We are not talking about neuralgia, or an impossible supervisor, or an irritable aunt who comes to dinner too frequently. We're talking, in the first century, about the very real possibility that associating with Jesus will end you up on a cross. And in the twentieth century we're talking about the challenge to change the fundamental way we look at life: to be converted. We're talking about a radical notion that the greatest good, the greatest happiness, is in letting go, giving, committing, loving, dying, rather than the logical and universally accepted notion that the greatest good and greatest happiness is in getting, clutching, accumulating, protecting and preserving.

The trouble with the new materialism, the "entitlement culture," someone called it recently, is not that the things of this world are evil, or that it's morally wrong to enjoy life. We've been consistently misunderstood on that point. What's wrong with selfishness is that it doesn't work. It doesn't make you happy.

We are beginning to learn that. We can move beyond attacking the narcissism of the 80s because it didn't work. Ivan Boesky appeared in court to testify last month and I was reminded that it was five years ago that he made the speech in which he said, "Greed is healthy. You can feel greedy, and still feel good about yourself." We tried it. We bought it, made a movie about it. And it didn't work. It didn't work, not because money and BMWs, and Rolexes are bad, but because if you live your life in order to enhance, adorn, decorate and indulge yourself, you're missing a truth built into the nature of things. The whims and wants of self are too small. The horizons of your soul - all alone - are too restricted. It doesn't work.

We seem to have learned that. It's why religion is getting another look at the very moment in history when we with our quaint notions of scrifice and altruism and compassion are supposed to be disappearing. The Tribune gave this discovery an international twist recently with a feature article on the new interest in spirituality in Japan. For the first time in history Japanese workers are earning more than their American counterparts. And discovering that money does not produce happiness. A Japanese artist was quoted: "The only message you hear in Japan these days is work, consume, work, consume. Isn't there more to life that that?" [Chicago Tribune, 7/8/90]

The wisdom of the world is that you must look out for number one because nobody else will. It's always been there, but it was only in the last decade that selfishness got baptized with respectability - academic, philosophic, political. The wisdom of the world is that you must take care

of yourself. The everyday wisdom of the world is that you can and ought to be your own best friend: you deserve a break today, give yourself a gift, do yourself a favor, be nice to yourself, indulge yourself.

Jesus said that if you want to live you must give your life away. If you want to be fully alive in the only life you're ever going to have, you have to loosen your grip on it a bit and start giving it, investing it, spending it for something other than your own amusement, enhancement or security.

If you are fortunate you have something or someone for whom you live and therefore for whom you would die if necessary. And if you do not, you are not fully alive in the only life you are ever going to have.

Sometimes history and circumstance put the issue dramatically: those first century Christians, for instance, who could protect themselves by recanting, or give their lives away. Lesslie Newbigin wrote recently, "It was not the superiority of the church's preaching which finally disarmed Roman imperial power but the faithfulness of the martyrs."
[The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, p. 137]

Or Father Maximillian Kolbe, stepping out of line at Auschwitz and volunteering to die in the place of another prisoner, father of five. Or for that matter, those precious young people sitting in the desert of Saudi Arabia, prepared to die if need be. Whether the cause is the right one or not, there they are this morning, with life on the line.

Sometimes the losing of life is dramatic and public. But mostly it is not, I think. Mostly it is the mother or father who learn daily that life is no longer simply the pursuit of personal agenda, that there is a joy - quite indescribable - in the investment of self in the life of someone else. Sometimes the taking up of a cross is the quiet faithfulness to convictions and loyalty to persons who need you when you really could find a way out: the mentally handicapped child, the spouse with debilitating disease, the parent with Alzheimers. Sometimes it is not giving up on the youngster in trouble with the law, or the man addicted to alcohol or the woman hooked on cocaine.

Jesus said - take up your cross and follow... find your life by losing it...claim your life by giving it away...

We saw "Shadowlands" in London, the play based on C. S. Lewis' relationship with Joy Graham, their marriage, her death of cancer shortly thereafter, and then his grief. It was a play that asked all the questions of suffering and tragedy and God - directly and without nuance. I will refer to it again, I am sure. But the stirring thing about the play, I thought, was the way human love summoned life, commanded life, made life suddenly possible in all its ecstasy and profundity and all its pain and tragedy. Lewis was a confirmed, middle-aged bachelor, Professor of Literature at Oxford at the pinnacle of his career with an international reputation as a scholar and author; comfortable in that world - teaching, lecturing, writing, sipping sherry in the evening with his fellow Dons, when he was accosted by life in the form of an American divorcee. To the horror of his academic colleagues, he slowly opened himself to love, which

also meant vulnerability and inconvenience and pain. They tried to persuade him not to. But love is compelling, you know. And so they married. And after she was afflicted with cancer, she died. And he felt pain like no pain he had ever experienced or imagined. Lewis does not answer the ancient dilemma of suffering.

But he did write like a disciple of Jesus:

"Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal...Keep your heart in a coffin," Lewis said, "and it will not be broken" - after his own heart was broken. There it will be safe, wrapped up in luxuries, hobbies - and it will not break. It will become unbreakable. "The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is hell."

Back when I was sent to church camp every summer, we used to sing a camp song with great gusto and childish innocence... "Do Lord, oh do Lord, oh do remember me. You take Jesus as your savior, I'll take him too..."

There was a verse I never thought about much and if I had thought about it, would not have understood -

"If you don't bear the cross
you can't wear the crown"

I didn't understand that at the age of twelve, but I think I do now.

It's what C. S. Lewis meant when he wrote about the vulnerability of love.

It's what Jesus meant when he said, "take up your cross and follow... Whoever would save life will lose it, and whoever loses life for my sake will find it."

And it is the issue before the house this morning...

The issue before you and me... about which we are called to decide... to declare, to choose, to take up, as it were.

The invitation is to live for him, and the shape of it will be different for each of us, except that it will mean, in some way, laying down your life, offering your body, taking up a cross.

That is the invitation and I invite you, in the privacy of your own heart, to say yes to that, to **Give it All.**

The promise? Whoever loses life for my sake, will find it.

Amen.